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Why British Politics is Not a Two-Party System

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The United Kingdom is *Not* a Two-Party System

Though long cited as a textbook case of two-party politics, a growing body of evidence suggests Britain is not a two-party system. Through comprehensive examination of the data, this paper dispels the major arguments in favour of viewing Britain as a two-party system.

Introduction

When teaching our students about the British party system, how should we describe it? Are politics in Britain essentially focused on two main parties, or is Britain rightly viewed as a multiparty system? Like any good democracy, British elections are multiparty affairs in the sense that these contests are open to and feature multiple parties (135 competed in the most recent election of 2015). But is competition truly multiparty in nature? Does the answer really matter?

Dispelling Notions of Two-Party Competition

The United Kingdom was long viewed as a classic two-party system. Early elections pitted the Conservatives against the Liberals, and the two parties would alternate control of government back and forth. Even as the Labour Party emerged to prominence in the 1920s, commentators still viewed British politics as essentially two-party in nature, as the rise of Labour coincided with the downfall of the Liberals. By the middle of the 20th century, elections were essentially a two-way race between Labour and the Conservatives.

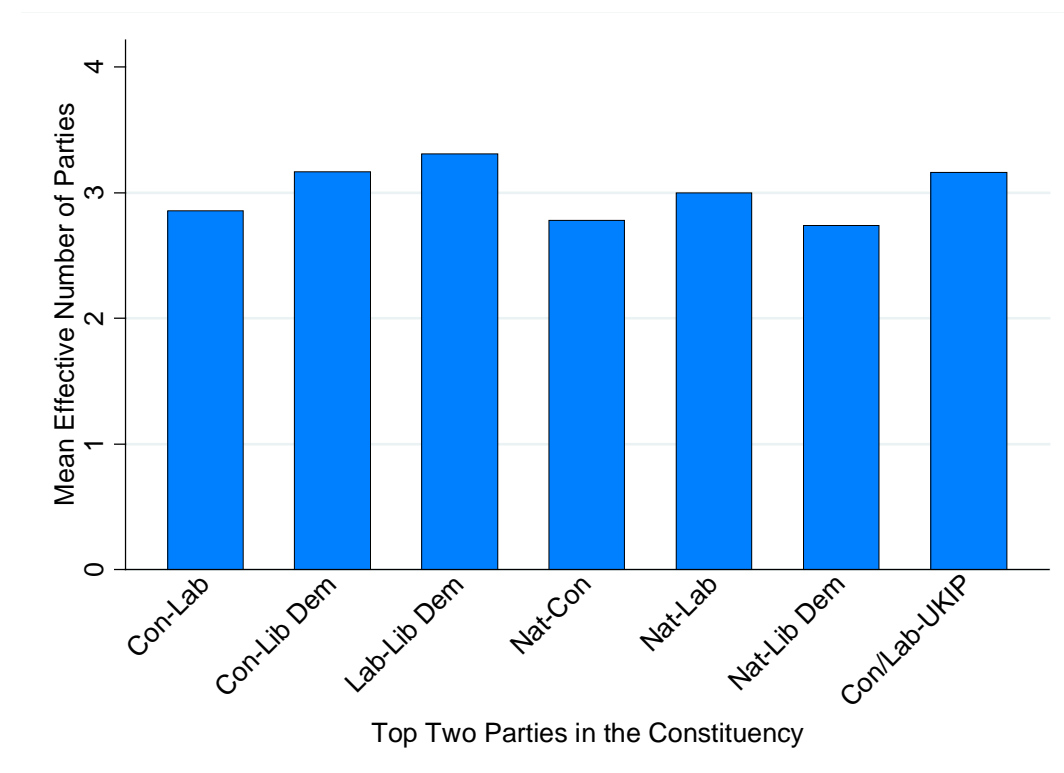
However, elections since the 1970s have been much more fragmented than those at mid-century. Whereas Labour and the Conservatives together won more than 90 per cent of the vote in the 1950s, the two parties have only been able to muster the support of two-thirds of the electorate in the two most recent elections. Beginning with the rise of a resurgent Liberal Party in the early 1970s and the rise of the Scottish National Party, followed by more recent developments including the emergence of UKIP and the Greens (and for a moment, seemingly the British National Party as well), elections in modern Britain have clearly become more multiparty in character than they used to be.

Though an increasing number of scholars have come around to the notion that the British party system (or systems) is not two-party in nature (e.g. Lynch, 2007), some still hold that British elections are two-party affairs for a number of reasons. One view holds that Britain appears to be a two-party system when one focuses on parties' seat shares. Because Labour and the Conservatives receive the majority of the seats in Parliament, so the argument goes, we should view Britain as a two-party system or, at worst, a two-and-a-half party system. However, such a

focus on seat shares contradicts the opinion that Britain is a two-party system when viewing elections in the past, as it did in the three-party era of the 1920s and '30s, just as it does now with the breakthrough success of the SNP in the 2015 election. Moreover, such a view ignores the fact that the United Kingdom was governed by coalition during the 2010-2015 term, as well as the fact that minority Labour governments in the 1920s and 1970s relied on Liberals to maintain confidence. Thus, by this definition, Britain is a multiparty system.

Others have responded by saying that, while the number of competitors is certainly greater than two when viewed at the national level, vote shares in individual constituencies are concentrated primarily on two parties. Though the two parties featuring most prominently may differ from one constituency to the next, tactical voting should limit the number of viable vote-winning parties to two (Cox, 1997, pp. 78-79). Previous research maintains that constituency-level results in Britain reflect these predictions, revolving primarily around two parties (Johnston & Pattie, 2011).

Figure 1: Average Party System Size by Type of Constituency Competition



Note: Nat = nationalist parties (Scottish National Party in Scotland, Plaid Cymru in Wales). Con/Lab = constituencies where either the Conservatives or Labour finished first or second.

Though in keeping with the notions asserted in Duverger's Law, this argument falls short when viewed against the evidence. To see this, Figure 1 examines the average effective number of parties (see Laakso & Taagepera, 1979), defined in terms of parties' vote shares, and broken

down according to the type of constituency (i.e. which two parties finished first and second in the constituency). The data show that even when we consider constituencies according to differences in the top-two parties locally, the outcomes are not mere two-way races, but in fact are evidence of genuine multiparty competition. In fact, no constituency type features fewer than effectively 2.78 parties; instead, each constituency type features effectively three-party competition. In other words, even when we focus on different types of constituency-level races, these do not appear to be two-party in nature either.

Additional Evidence

Two other sets of evidence would appear to confirm that Britain is not a two-party system. First, looking over time, we see that the number of parties in British elections has exceeded two for a long time. This can be seen in two ways. One is by looking at the effective number of parties competing in elections when viewed at the national level. While the number of parties competing at the national level may deviate from two-party expectations, it is possible we may not see (effectively) more than two parties competing in any one constituency (Cox, 1997, pp. 78-79). Thus, a second way to examine the number of parties is by looking at the average effective number of parties competing at the constituency level in each election over time.

Figure 2: Two Measures of Party System Fragmentation over Time

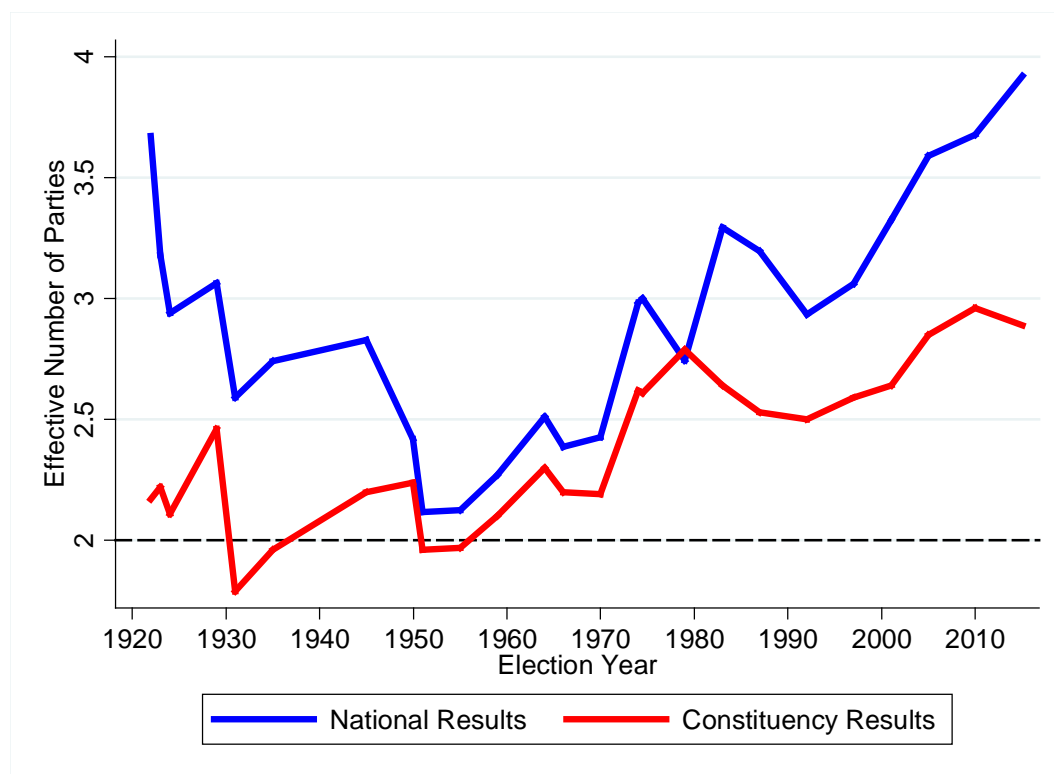
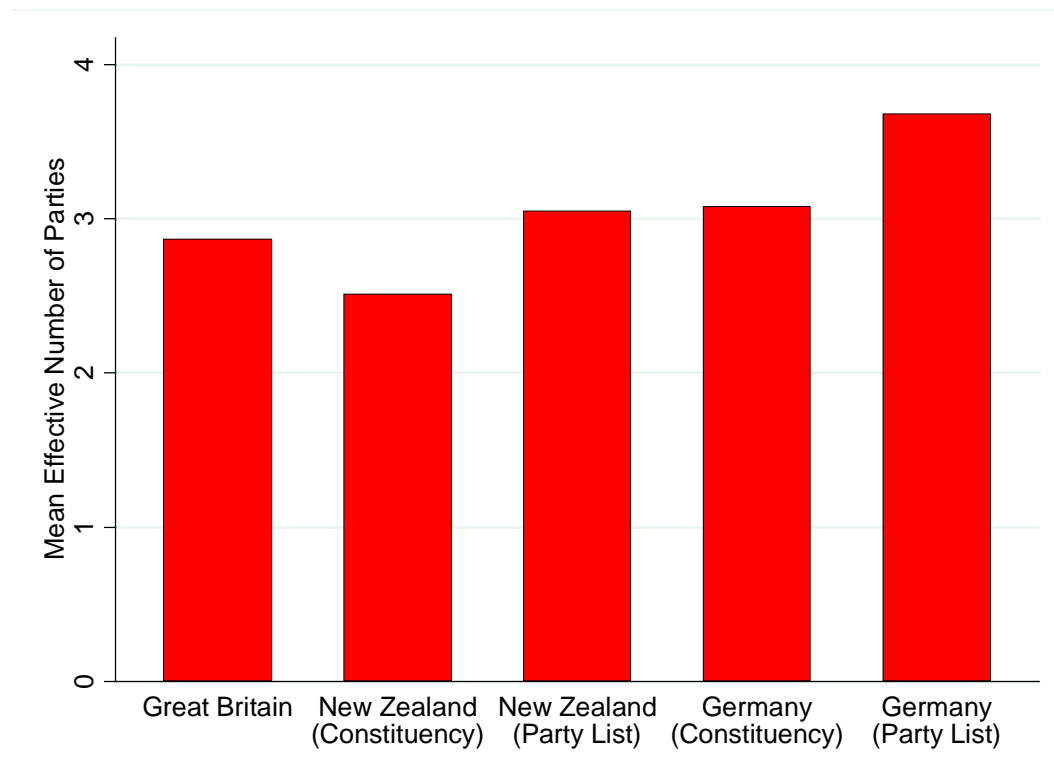


Figure 2 presents both measures of party system fragmentation for elections between 1922 (the first election after partition) and 2015. Both measures clearly exceed notions of two-party competition for much of this time series. The multiparty nature of the two most recent elections has in fact been characteristic of British elections for decades, particularly since 1974. By the end of the time series, British elections at the constituency level feature nearly three-party competition.

Figure 3: The British Party System in Comparative Perspective



Moreover, we can see that the British party system is not a two-party system when we put the most recent election in comparative perspective with other countries that are considered multiparty systems. In particular, Figure 3 compares the mean constituency-level effective number of parties in 2015 with the comparable figures in New Zealand (using results from the 2014 election) and Germany (using results from the 2013 election). In addition to the fact that both New Zealand and Germany are universally considered to be multiparty systems, examining the British party system in relation to these two-party systems is useful because both New Zealand and Germany employ mixed-member proportional representation electoral systems. This means that not only can we compare the average constituency-level party system in Britain with the average party systems in the constituency tiers in New Zealand and Germany, but we can also compare the average British constituency-level party system with the results from the party

list proportional representation tiers of both countries (which are designed to promote multiparty systems).

Figure 3 presents the mean constituency-level effective number of parties in all three countries, using results from both the constituency and party ballots in New Zealand and Germany. The data show that Britain is not much different from these multiparty systems. In fact, the data show that the mean effective number of parties in Britain is comparable to both New Zealand and Germany. This is particularly the case when viewing the figures for the constituency ballot. The British party system is comparable even to the figures associated with the party ballot tiers.

Thus, the data show that Britain is not a two-party system. In fact, Britain has not been a two-party system in any electoral sense for a long time. Moreover, the British party system does not even look like a two-party system when viewed in comparative perspective.

The Consequences

Does any of this matter? Does the distinction between two-party and multiparty systems matter for an understanding of British politics?

There are two particular reasons this distinction matters. The first is that multiparty competition changes the electoral calculi of voters. When multiple viable parties exist, it becomes more difficult for voters to determine which party is out of the running. When this happens, multiparty systems can become self-perpetuating, as voters fail to desert third parties because they stand a reasonable chance of winning the seat – or at least displacing one of the top-two parties (which, in turn, increases the chances of winning enough tactical votes to win the seat in future elections). This failure to desert third parties will only intensify the multiparty nature of electoral competition. Moreover, multiparty competition only makes it more difficult for voters to elect governments by reducing the clarity of choices regarding the composition of government. One need only refer to the uncertainty following the 2010 election, or the confusion surrounding potential governments in the run-up to the 2015 election to see evidence of this point.

More importantly, the presence of multiple viable parties qualitatively changes the nature of electoral competition. With more parties competing in elections, parties of the centre right and centre left must compete not only with each other over policy issues, but also with the smaller parties seeking to outflank them through blackmail (e.g. Sartori, 1976). In order to win elections, parties of the centre left in multiparty systems must compete with parties of the centre right. In order to maintain credibility among their base, however, parties of the centre left must also compete with parties further to the left (and vice versa for parties of the centre right). Absent the support of the base, it is impossible to win an election, but appealing to the base too much also prevents the party from winning the centrist voters needed to win the election.

Two recent examples illustrate this point. One can see the effect of multiparty competition when looking at the Conservatives on the EU question. In order to win elections, the party must negotiate a difficult balance as it competes simultaneously with Labour and UKIP. As in a two-party system, the Conservatives must compete against Labour for the median voter in order to win control of government, and to do so requires that the party not present a position that is entirely hostile to the EU. Unlike a true two-party system, however, the Conservatives cannot ignore their Eurosceptic base of supporters, who are not beholden to the least Europhile of the two main parties, but rather could defect to UKIP should the Prime Minister fail in his efforts to re-balance the UK's relationship with Europe in favour of the nation-state.

On the left, the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party – and the internal divide his election has exposed – illustrates a similar situation on the left. In order to get back to the party's winning ways, many in Labour's parliamentary party want to return to the Blairite formula, competing with the Conservatives over which party is most competent to handle the UK's capitalist economy. Others, however, feel that the party needs to restore its soul by appealing to those who have drifted away from the Party in favour of alternatives more vocal in their opposition to austerity, such as the Green Party in England, the SNP in Scotland, and Plaid Cymru in Wales.

Conclusion

This essay has advocated that the UK should be viewed as a multiparty system rather than some form of a two-party system. The data presented here demonstrated that – by all definitions – Britain is a multiparty system, one that is comparable to other multiparty systems. Beyond semantics, this issue has important theoretical and practical consequences regarding the day-to-day conduct of British politics. As such, it is high time we cease to believe otherwise and treat Britain's party politics as reflective of a *bona fide* multiparty system.

Further Reading

Cox, G.W. (1997) *Making votes count: strategic coordination in the world's electoral systems*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

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West Europe', *Comparative Political Studies*, 12 (1), pp. 3-27.

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